SUNY New Paltz is on fire. In 2007, Newsweek named New Paltz "the hottest small state school" in the country. The college has seen a 40 percent increase in freshmen applications since 2000, and has received more applications than any other SUNY school for 18 consecutive years. Numbers are up at nearly every college in the country as of late, but not to this extent. So what is it? Of every small-sized public university between California and Cape Cod, what makes New Paltz the most attractive?

Part of the explanation lies in demographics. A whopping 67 percent of New Paltz students are women — the highest percentage of any campus in the 64-school SUNY system (other than the College of Optometry and the Fashion Institute), and nine points higher than the national average. As student populations across the country have become more female, universities that women find appealing only become more popular. So why are women flocking to New Paltz? One reason may be the college's academic offerings. Education and art, two traditionally female-dominated fields, are considered New Paltz's biggest specialties. In fact, New Paltz offers programs in the five majors — visual arts, communications, business, social sciences and history, and health professions and related clinical sciences — that increased the most in popularity between 2001 and 2006.

Geography plays a role as well. Besides Stony Brook, New Paltz is the comprehensive SUNY closest to the undergrad factory known as Long Island — far enough away to give teenagers the freedom they seek, but close enough to allow them to come home and let Mom do the laundry once in a while. For that reason, the school draws more and more interest each year from students who grew up in this affluent, population-heavy suburban area. More than 22 percent of New Paltz applicants hail from Long Island, a region that makes up just 14 percent of the state population.

Demographics and location aside, the quality and value of a New Paltz education cannot be overlooked. For a little less than $15,000 a year, students have access to 100 undergraduate programs (and, for a little more money, 50 graduate programs), 130 student organizations, and cultural programming that includes an art museum, three theaters, and a recital hall. The campus has grown in proportion to the number of transcripts and student essays its admissions office receives. Over the past decade, the school added two new dormitories, totally revamped one academic building with the latest SMART classroom technology, and opened a new athletic and wellness center; by the time next fall's incoming freshman graduates, New Paltz will also sport a new science building, a renovated library and education building, and an expanded student union. Then there's everything the New Paltz area offers its residents: a vibrant downtown; tons of outdoors activities; and a funky, unique atmosphere.

There's no telling when — or if — the school's popularity will subside. Like the latest cell phone fad or fashion trend, New Paltz benefits from a sort of homeroom-chatter multiplier effect — the more en vogue it appears, the more high school seniors will want to be part of the action. The influx of applicants has transformed the school, dramatically bolstering its academic reputation. " Fifteen years ago, I could call an admissions director and ask about getting a B- student in, and they would do it," says Diana Babington, a guidance counselor at Spackenkill High School in Poughkeepsie. "Now, I could call for a 90s-average student, and they couldn't help me." Whatever the CPA of its student body, it's apparent SUNY New Paltz is the place to be.

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